

Chuuk Lagoon; trip Report: 17th – 24th July 2011

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Today it is hard to believe that the isolated and tranquil islands of the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Yap, Kosrae and Pohnpei), formerly known as the Caroline Islands, could be the scene of a major battle. Today visitors are greeted by swaying palm trees, smiling locals and the warmth and sunshine typical of the idyllic Pacific. But step back a few generations and Chuuk was a closed territory, off limits to all visitors. Formerly controlled by Germany it had been taken over by Japan in 1914 and in the inter-war years had been turned into a major logistical hub and home operations base for the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet. By the outbreak of war in the Pacific, Truk Lagoon (now renamed Chuuk) was heavily fortified, had several airstrips and was garrisoned with 1,000's of troops.

By 1944 the Japanese were in full retreat across the Pacific with American forces slowly clearing them from one island chain at a time. As part of the preparations for the invasion of Eniwetok (Marshall Islands) it was decided that in order to maintain air and naval superiority Truk had to be attacked. During February 17-18th 1944 the American's launched Operation Hailstone, attacking both

ships and airbases with over 500 aircraft, launched from 5 aircraft carriers. The resulting Japanese shipping losses exceeded 220,000 tons. This was destruction on a massive scale.

Sixty Years later in 2004 I had my first visit to the Lagoon. Back then I was a keen but relatively inexperienced wreck diver, still using a single tank – although I occasionally carried a small side-slung bottle for accelerated decompression. I distinctly remember three wonderful things from this trip. Firstly how intact the wrecks were relative to those I usually dived in the English Channel. The wrecks in Truk Lagoon were easy to navigate, easy to penetrate and it was easy to identify where you were at any given time. They were also crammed with artefacts and cargo, something almost unheard of in the heavily plundered UK waters.



Secondly I remember the life and colour – the wrecks were all heavily encrusted with both hard and soft coral and home to a large amount of marine life. And of course unlike the UK the water was calm (totally enclosed in a lagoon), warm and clear. In fact it was almost like we had

two separate dives every time we got into the water, one a wreck exploration and the other a tropical reef dive. And thirdly I remember our boat. Following some advice from a group of divers we had met on a previous

trip we had opted to do a live-aboard instead of land-based diving – and it was a great choice. We stayed on the Odyssey and it was more comfortable and luxurious than our flat back in London. I loved it. By the time I left I knew I wanted to return.

Seven years and over 1,000 dives later I finally returned, using my rapidly approaching 40th birthday as the spur to get organised. Again we stayed on the Odyssey and again the trip was amazing. Here are a few of the highlights:

Kiyosumi Maru

87m, 8614-ton passenger-cargo ship built in 1934 to provide a service between New York and Kobe, Japan. Converted 1941 into an armed auxiliary cruiser, with 8 anti-aircraft guns and a pair of torpedo launchers. Located in the Repair Anchorage, resting on her port side. Starboard side rises to within 14m of the surface.

We did two dives on this wreck, including our shake down dive at the start of the holiday. With the wreck lying on her side the single prop is clearly visible and in the aft hold you can see two spare prop blades still strapped to a bulkhead. In hold 4 I remember a couple of bicycles, but otherwise the holds are relatively empty. Just outside of hold 2 there was a small display of various artefacts and a skull, serving as a reminder of the ships violent end. Holds 1 & 2 are easily explored by less experienced divers as they both have huge holes from torpedo impacts. On our second dive we explored the engine room, which although not easily accessible is wide open once you are inside.

Yamagiri Maru

134m, 6438-ton passenger-cargo ship built in 1938. Located in the Repair Anchorage, resting on her port side. Starboard side rises to within 9m of the surface.

At the time of her sinking this wreck was undergoing repairs so was virtually empty, however the remaining cargo is of particular interest. When the first divers visited the aft two holds they reported finding 18” artillery shells – the largest shells ever used by the Japanese Navy.

This report was subsequently published in a variety of different guides to Truk Lagoon. However, since that time divers have returned and accurately measured the shells – they are only 14”. But they are still enormous, scattered about the hold and lying against the drive shaft. Most of the bridge and superstructure have gone on this vessel, but the engine room is full of surprises – particularly the skull which was clearly wedged into a lathe by the force of an explosion. It is easy to miss as it is tucked away and directly above your head as you enter the small machine shop area. This dive was also memorable for the amount of coral and life, particularly a neon pink anemone towards the stern.





Fumitsuki

103m, 1193-ton Mutsuki Class Destroyer, built in 1926. One of only two true warships sunk in the lagoon, the other is the destroyer Oite. Originally moored in the repair anchorage, but damaged and sunk north of Udot whilst trying to escape the American raid. Sits upright on the seabed at 38m with a slight list to port. The deck is at 30m with much of the superstructure rising above that. No penetration possibilities.

We only did one dive on this wreck as it has no viable penetration options; complete gear removal would be the only way, and even then it would be

very tight. However as she sunk away from most of the islands the visibility is considerably better and it is easy to glide along above the wreck and appreciate how streamlined she is compared to the cargo vessels. You can also see how quite how twisted and buckled she is – a result of the American raids. The props are clearly very different from the Marus, designed for speed rather than power. The torpedo launcher just in front of the superstructure is clearly identifiable, as is the deck track used for moving the enormous long-lance torpedoes around. The stern gun is only difficult to recognise because it is so encrusted with coral. A beautiful dive.

Shinkoku Maru

152m, 10102-ton naval tanker built in 1940. One of eight tankers used to refuel the ships involved on the attack on Pearl Harbour. Located north east of Udot, sitting upright on the bottom at 38m. The superstructure rises to within 12m of the surface.

We did 3 dives on this ship, two during the day and a night dive – and WOW! This ship is everything a true romantic would envisage about a pacific wreck – all life and colour, a photographers dream. All the wooden walls and most of the ceilings and floors of the forward superstructure have rotted away, leaving a metal frame work perfect for soft coral to colonise. And yet you can still see several identifiable features, including the 3 bridge telegraphs. Lower in the forward superstructure there is a galley, complete with enormous rice cookers and a sickbay complete with medicine chest and operating table. At the stern you can see depth charge launchers and both the bow and stern guns are worthy of magazine covers. The engine room, which is well worth a visit, felt like a scene from an alpine village with a light powder of silt covering every horizontal surface. Light also enters the engine room from a hole close to the seabed where the vessel was struck by torpedoes. From the



engine room you can rise up into the aft superstructure and visit the crew's quarters. As this was a tanker there is a raised gantry with pipework running the length of the ship, used for moving the oil about. As this gantry has water movement all around, it is now covered by soft corals – hydroids and gorgonian fans – again all the photographers on our trip went snap-happy. During our night dive we had several small grey-reef sharks keeping us company. This was one of the best wrecks of the trip.

Unkai Maru

101m, 3220-ton cargo ship built in Great Britain in 1905, purchased by the Japanese in 1911 – the oldest ship in the lagoon. Due to her age she was not drafted into the war until just a few weeks before Operation Hailstone, when Japanese shipping losses were become unsustainable. Located north of Uman in the Sixth Fleet Anchorage, sitting upright on the seabed at 39m, with the deck at 30m and the superstructure rising to 24m.

Even if you didn't know this ship was older than the rest most observant divers would recognise her design as significantly different. Unlike the other Marus the Unkai does not have tween decks. Instead her holds are just big empty spaces, giving the impression the ship is actually a big bath tub. Her engine room is also much smaller than most others. We only did one dive on this wreck as she is empty of cargo, but the visibility was

pretty good making it an interestingly different dive.



Rio De Janeiro Maru

140m, 9626-ton luxury passenger liner built in 1930. Requisitioned in 1940 and converted into a submarine tender. Located east of Uman, lying on her starboard side in 35m of water. Port side rises to within 12m of the surface.

This was another of the best wrecks of the trip and we had two awesome exploration dives inside. On the first we concentrated on the engine room, which is much bigger than most. I have a very vivid memory of a huge control panel and switching board, plus dozens of

gauges and dials. We also explored the forward holds which have a cargo of now jumbled gun turrets. On our second dive we explored the rest of the superstructure which is very extensive (this ship was a liner rather than mainly a cargo vessel) and we visited the galley and store rooms. This was one of the more complicated penetrations, with only one way in and out and no visible light for much of it. This area was also very silty, but as it is hard to get into there was far less damage and many more artefacts to look at. We ended our dive at the stern of the ship, where there are two large props and an aft hold jammed full of saki bottles, still in their crates and wrapped tightly in paper.

Sankisan Maru

113m, 4776-ton army cargo ship. Background is a mystery, although reported as originally the Red Hook, an American depression era vessel captured by the Japanese in 1942. Located west of Uman, sitting upright with her deck at 15m and her masts close to the surface. (A popular snorkelling site.)

This is really only half a wreck. One of the American bombs scored a direct hit in one of the ordinance filled aft holds, completely obliterating most of the aft of the ship. The remains of the aft end are 200m away from the bow section. However the bow section is heavily encrusted with hard corals and the 3 remaining holds contain some interesting cargo. There are two aircraft engines, spare aircraft wings, a truck chassis and more bullets than any non-military personnel are ever likely to see. Amazingly even though all the bullets are still live many divers take this opportunity to spell out messages with the loose ammunition.



Hoki Maru

138m, 7113-ton cargo ship built in 1921 for the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand – originally named the MV Hauraki until captured in July 1942. Sits upright in 53m of water, with her deck at 42m and superstructure rising to 30m.

You can't have a NZ trip to Truk without visiting the only NZ ship in the lagoon. We only did one dive on this ship due to the depth, but I can still picture this wreck quite clearly due to the incredible damage it sustained. One of the forward holds was full of aviation gasoline and took a direct hit from an American bomb. The result was the forward section of the ship peeling open like a banana. The only way to properly appreciate this is to float quite high above the wreckage so you can see the whole ship – otherwise the damage is just so unbelievable as to make it unrecognisable as a ship. I also remember the masts which rise up above the superstructure. They are densely covered in sponges in a myriad of colours.

Fujikawa Maru

132m, 6983-ton passenger-cargo ship built in 1938 used on routes to North and South America and India before being requisitioned in 1940. Located in the 4th Fleet anchorage south of Etten, she sits upright in 34m of water, with her deck at 18m, her superstructure rising to 9m and her kingpost to 6m.



Another of the signature dives at Truk Lagoon and a must-do dive for any visitor. We did 3 dives, two during the day and a night dive and we could easily have done many many more without getting bored. On our first dive Nelson (our Captain) took us for a tour, showing us the upper and middle engine room, complete with machine shop fully kitted out with lathe, grinder, pile drill and various tools. We also explored the poop deck, the galley and the stern area, which has another amazingly photogenic gun. One our second dive we explored the lower engine room, which included a telephone booth and huge intact engine control panel. In the hold area we

also saw a compressor and banks of oxygen bottles which were used to fill the long-lance torpedoes. (Compressed oxygen leaves a much smaller bubble trail than compressed air, making it harder for enemy ships to spot approaching torpedoes and manoeuvre out of the way.) On our night dive we were again joined by several grey reef sharks and also a couple of cuttlefish which seemed entranced by our dive lights. The coral growth, colour and life on this wreck rivals the Shinkoku, but it is impossible to pick one wreck over the other. If you go to Truk you MUST do both wrecks.

Nippo Maru

107m, 3764-ton passenger-cargo ship built in 1936, requisitioned by the navy in 1941. Located in the 4th Fleet Anchorage east of Tonoas, she's sits upright, higher at the stern and with a slight list to port. The maximum depth of the seabed is 45m at the bow, with the stern of the ship slowly being reclaimed by the reef. A sand bank partially covers the poop-deck and rises sharply. The highest point of the wreck is at 21m.

Another fairly deep wreck so we only did one dive. This was the only wreck where we had any current, although it was strongest at the surface and caused little problem on the wreck itself. The three features which stand out for me from this dive was firstly some of the cargo located on the deck itself – a 3 man tank and several artillery guns/howitzers. Secondly the bridge which still has its walls, ceiling, telegraph and speaking tube – incredibly photogenic; and thirdly the fish life. Throughout the dive we were accompanied by a huge school of marauding pelagic fish, including many very large Bluefin Trevally. We also saw several grey reef sharks circling in the distance.



Heian Maru

155m, 11614-ton luxury liner built in 1930 at a cost of \$15 million. On her maiden voyage she set the trans-pacific speed record on a trip to Seattle. Converted to a navy submarine tender in 1941 she is located to the west of Tonoas, close to the submarine repair base. Lies on her port side in 36m, with the shallowest part of the wreck rising to 12m.

This was the biggest ship we dived during our trip and from a penetration point of view definitely my favourite. We did two dives, both involving significant penetrations and durations inside the ship, but we saw artefacts during these dives which we didn't see on any other dives. As usual the engine room was full of interesting features, but it was really the extensive superstructure which holds most secrets. (Again this was originally a luxury passenger liner rather than a naval vessel.) Firstly we got to see a collection of periscopes, both general use and attack scopes, which have a much smaller viewing window for less surface wake. There is also the china room, obviously a store room of some kind which has hundreds of china plates all encrusted together.

However, both these features are easily accessible by most divers – it was the other rooms further into the superstructure which were most impressive. After several tight squeezes through some areas which look perilously close to collapse (no touching anything, not even much breathing out) we reached an area with bathrooms and bunkrooms. Unlike everywhere else these rooms still have most of the wood intact – the beds, the wall panelling etc and the bathrooms look almost untouched by divers. These rooms definitely had the most atmosphere of any we saw during our trip – possibly added to by our nervousness at the instability of the area we had swum through.

Tucked away in a far corner of this wreck we also saw a complete blood-letting kit, with all of the ampules and other paraphernalia still in place, and floating against the ceiling we found 100s of other medical phials, bottles and ampules, all still intact and with their various coloured contents swirling inside. Seeing stuff like this really makes a wreck come alive and it was easy to imagine the ship's medical officer using this equipment. The forward hold is also quite different as it has been converted to store the long-lance torpedoes. Instead of a big square hatch the entry into hold 1 is a long thin rectangle, just big enough for the 24' torpedoes to fit through. Inside there are various torpedoes scatted like children's toys, including on which stands like the leaning tower of Pisa, with nothing obviously holding it up – definitely very eerie. The final memorable part of both these dives was during our decompression stops when we had a large barracuda keeping us company.



San Fransisco Maru

117m, 5831-ton passenger-cargo ship built in 1919. Known as 'the Million Dollar Wreck' because it is completely packed with war cargo, including mines, bombs, torpedoes, tanks, aircraft parts and trucks. Located in the 4th Fleet anchorage she sits upright on the bottom at 60m, with the deck at 53m, the top of the superstructure at 48m and the mast rising to 30m.

This was our deepest dive of the trip and the only one where we had to change our breathing and decompression mixes. Due to the depth we only did one dive and avoided doing a night dive on the day before and a second dive later in the morning. The wreck itself is very similar to the others in its layout, but it is the contents of the holds which leaves a lasting impression. Hemispheric

beach mines stacked one on top of another, trays of detonators, racks of rockets and crates of aerial bombs. As you sink into hold 1 the sheer quantity of munitions is both astonishing and sobering – no random fin kicks in here. In the other holds there are also aircraft parts, trucks and long-lance torpedoes. But it is the three tanks parked on the deck which make it into many guide books as the signature photo. One sits on the port side and two sit on the starboard side, one resting on the other, all just in front of the bridge. They are all 3-man tanks and the hatch is open on one of the tanks. Quite a lot of sediment has built up inside the tank, but it is still hard to imagine how 3 people ever got in, let alone had enough room to move and go into battle.

Kensho Maru

116m, 4862-ton passenger-cargo ship. Located in the repair anchorage she sits upright with a list to port in 36m of water. The deck is at 24 and the superstructure rises to 18m.

The final dive of our trip and we were back where we started in the repair anchorage. After the improved visibility of the last few days it was a bit of a shock to be back to 10-12m vis again, but once inside the wreck this is irrelevant. Two things stand out from this dive – the wreck has the best preserved radio room equipment we saw all week and the meticulousness (possibly OCD) of the chief engineer. As per almost all the wrecks the engine room is well worth a visit, but this particular one stands out because all around the walls there are tools, carefully laid out in exact size order. There are two sets of spanners/wrenches, a complete socket set and various other important pieces of equipment – and nothing is out of place. The spanners are all perfectly lined up in size order, the same with the sockets. In a small area just to the side of the workshop (probably the chief engineer's office) there is a work bench and cubby holes again all carefully laid out. There is even a table of valves laid out for service with each valve in exactly the same state of repair. I imagine the chief engineer would have been very difficult to work with if you weren't a naturally tidy crewman.

Diving in Truk generally

Compared to many other locations the diving in Truk is very comfortable. Almost all the diving happens within the lagoon, so currents, waves, surge etc are not a big issue. The largest waves we saw all week wouldn't be more than 1m. The water temp was around 28 degrees celcius. I used a 3mm wetsuit, but more for protection inside the wrecks instead of warmth. Visibility was mixed, with 10-12m in the repair anchorage, rising to 20m on the wrecks further away from the islands.



Most of the wrecks are Marus, cargo vessels. In Japanese Maru means circle – think of a cargo vessel going backwards and forwards between various ports, completing a circular voyage. There are two warships in the lagoon – Fumitsuki and Oite, plus several planes and subs – however the Marus are interesting because of their cargo.

The only flights in and out of Truk are with Continental Airlines (recently merged with United). The quickest route is via Guam, or you can do the 'island hopper', which goes via at least 4 other stops on its way to Hawaii. I did this in 2004 and whilst it is picturesque seeing lots of small islands it was a very long trip.

On either side of our time on the Odyssey we stayed at the Blue Lagoon Resort. There is basically nothing much to do in Truk if you are not diving and the town is very basic.

Thanks to Todd, Nelson, Kent and Madison for all the guiding and all the rest of the crew. Totally awesome! And thanks to Cas for all the great photos.